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SUBJECT: GOT PREVENTS LEGAL OPPOSITION PARTY FROM
REGISTERING NEW NEWSPAPER

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Leaders of the legal opposition party Democratic Forum for Labor and Liberties (FDTL) attempted to register a new newspaper on November 16, but were denied the necessary receipt from the Ministry of Interior (MOI) that would allow the would-be publishers to begin the process of authorization. Subsequent efforts to register the paper were also denied. The MOI's refusal was not surprising given FDTL's well-known anti-regime stance, and the GOT's unwillingness to allow significant independent media outlets in Tunisia. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) On November 16, Mustapha Ben Jaafar, Secretary General of opposition party Democratic Forum for Labor and Liberties (FDTL) and Dr. Khalid Zaouia, a member of the party's Political Bureau, attempted to submit an application to the Ministry of Interior to publish a new newspaper. FDTL is a small, authorized, independent party with no representation in Parliament. Ben Jaafar is an outspoken pro-democracy activist and regime critic and a leader of the 18 October Movement. The Tunisian press code stipulates that to establish a newspaper, the publisher must submit a written application including the name of the printing shop to be used to the MOI and obtain a receipt. If, after a four-month period the MOI does not reject the application, the newspaper is automatically authorized and may begin publication. In the past, the Ministry of Interior has refused to accept applications from other independent NGOs and opposition parties seeking to create newspapers, allowing the Ministry to de facto refuse the publication, without having to give an official explanation.

¶3. (SBU) According to a November 21 FDTL communique, Jaafar and Zaouia went to the MOI to present their application. Despite a one-hour discussion at the reception area and in front of the MOI building, MOI officials refused to accept FDTL's application and provide a receipt. MOI officials reportedly told Ben Jaafar to submit their application at the Governor of Tunis's office. Ben Jaafar subsequently set up two meetings with the governor and deputy governor to submit the application, but after arriving for the meetings was told that the deputy governor was travelling. According to the communique, the MOI and the governor's office did not reply to subsequent attempts to register the newspaper or to be given an explanation for the refusal.

¶4. (C) In a second communique on November 28, Ben Jaafar reported that he had been contacted by the head of the MOI Political Affairs Department, Mohamed Habib H'riz. According to Ben Jaafar, H'riz initially pledged to solve the problem, but in a subsequent call two days later, informed Ben Jaafar that the Ministry would be unable to give FDTL a receipt of registration. FDTL leaders then decided to send the request for registration by registered mail, requiring an MOI signature in order to receive the letter. FDTL would then

use the date of this receipt as the beginning of the four-month review period, and begin publishing if no objection had been raised at the end of that period. Ben Jaafar told PolFSN he had sent the registered letter on November 29, and was awaiting a response. He said he could not understand the MOI's decision given the FDTL's legal status. He added that the party's newspaper, tentatively titled "Citizens," is little more than a concept, as the party does not have sufficient funds to begin publication even if it was to receive authorization.

15. (C) Comment: FDTL joins the National Council for Liberties in Tunisia (CNLT), and other independent NGOs and unauthorized political parties that have tried to enter the Tunisian media scene, but who, due to their well-earned reputation for anti-GOT rhetoric, stand little chance of obtaining the requisite MOI approval. However, unlike other would-be publishers such as CNLT and the unauthorized Green Party, FDTL is a legal opposition party. Another legal, independent opposition party, PDP (Democratic Progressive Party), is permitted to publish Al-Mawqif, Tunisia's most independent legal newspaper, although the newspaper receives no advertising revenue, has a minuscule distribution, and is periodically seized from newsstands. The approval of FDTL's newspaper would be a positive step towards our principal Freedom Agenda goal of increased freedom of expression, and given FDTL's legal status, may still occur despite the hoops the party is jumping through at the moment to register. On the other hand, if the GOT denies authorization for a legal opposition party to publish a newspaper, it will be further indication of the GOT's allergic reaction to any criticism or independent media voices, and will be unfortunately business as usual. End Comment.
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